

The Consequences of Campaign Agendas

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Theories of candidate agendas suggest two potentially conflicting imperatives for candidates: focus on issues that their party “owns” or on issues that are salient to the public. The implication is that candidates may ultimately lose votes for ignoring either or both of these imperatives. However, no systematic test of either theory exists. This article provides a fuller test using candidate advertising data from the 1998, 2000, and 2002 House and Senate elections and finds that neither theory is supported. Candidates did not consistently emphasize owned or salient issues in any of these elections. Moreover, candidate agendas have little effect on electoral outcomes. These results highlight the need for more nuanced theories of candidate strategy.

Keywords: *political campaigns; issue ownership; U.S. House elections; U.S. Senate elections; campaign agendas; campaign strategy*

Introduction

Do the choices candidates make about which issues to emphasize and which to ignore translate into votes on election day? Although at times events and public opinion put certain issues on the agenda, candidates themselves must decide how much to emphasize them and whether to introduce other issues, their ultimate goal being to shift the agenda to issues that favor them and in so doing improve their chances of winning. Several extant theories suggest how candidates should structure their agendas, but there is no systematic evidence that choices about campaign agendas have any measurable effect. We know more about the origins of agendas than about their consequences.

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Theory and Expectations

Theoretical accounts of agenda setting or “heresthetics” (Riker, 1983) demonstrate how it can benefit candidates (e.g., Carsey, 2000; Hammond & Humes, 1993; Simon, 2002). The question that follows is “Which kinds of agendas are advantageous to candidates?” This article considers two theories—issue ownership and issue salience—that generate contrasting expectations about how candidates should build their agendas.

Issue ownership theory holds that candidates should emphasize issues that their party “owns” (Petrocik, 1996). Ownership exists when voters tend to trust a particular party to “handle” a particular issue, and this trust arises when a party has demonstrated “a history of attention, initiative and innovation toward” an issue (Petrocik, 1996, p. 826).¹ Various studies show that issue ownership influences what candidates talk about (Brasher, 2003; Budge & Farlie, 1983; Kahn & Kenney, 1999; Petrocik, 1996; Spiliotes & Vavreck, 2002; Sulkin & Evans, 2006), though other work finds mixed effects at best (Damore, 2004, 2005; Ridout, Kaplan, & Park, 2006; Sides, 2006; Sigelman & Buell, 2004).

Ownership may affect not only what candidates say but also whether voters listen. Several studies find that voters’ beliefs about parties’ reputations condition their response to campaign messages (Ansolabehere & Iyengar, 1994; Iyengar & Valentino, 2000). Voters support candidates when they agree not only with the candidate’s issue positions but also the candidate’s positions on issues that the candidate’s party owns (Abbe, Goodliffe, Herrnson, & Patterson, 2003). Thus, voters appear to find messages about the issues a candidate’s party owns to be more credible.²

But what if candidates “trespass” on the other party’s territory? Some research finds that these candidates are wasting resources. Iyengar and Valentino (2000, p. 128) demonstrate that “the sponsoring candidate who chose to advertise on the ‘wrong’ issue was better off showing no advertisement at all.” Simon (2002) shows that trespassing can even hurt a candidate’s chances of winning. In his study of the 1994 California gubernatorial race, Simon argues that Democrat Kathleen Brown’s decision to fight Republican Pete Wilson on “Republican” turf (the issue of crime and the death penalty in particular) was “misplaced strategic[ally]” (p. 91). Her eventual loss to a vulnerable incumbent came about because of her “decision to dialogue on the subject of crime” (p. 66). Issue trespassing could thus be a recipe for defeat.

Despite this evidence, ownership theory may not provide a realistic account of campaign strategy for two reasons. First, ownership is a dynamic, not fixed, attribute of parties. The dynamics of issue ownership derive in part from a party’s performance on an issue. If a party’s current performance is

poor, a history of good stewardship may be forgotten. As Petrocik (1996) notes, ownership may imply only a "short-term lease" (see also Petrocik, Benoit, & Hansen, 2003, p. 602). Empirically, ownership does shift over time (Sides, 2006) and therefore may not provide candidates a reliable guide when they are formulating strategy.

Second, candidates can talk effectively about the other party's "owned" issues by framing those issues in certain ways. Petrocik (1996, p. 829) articulates this idea: "When the opponent's issues are unavoidable, they can be interpreted in a way to highlight some feature of the issue on which they are likely to be regarded as more competent." Holian (2004, p. 99) shows that President Clinton discussed crime, a traditionally Republican issue, by shifting the frame from punishment to prevention and emphasizing an increase in police officers on the streets, among other initiatives. One could use Holian's (2004) insight to revise Simon's (2002) analysis of the 1994 California gubernatorial race: Brown lost not because she engaged Wilson on the issue of crime but because the campaign focused on punishment instead of prevention, and especially on the death penalty. Another example of trespassing through framing is Republican congressional candidates' emphasis on the "Democratic" issue of education in the 1998 election. They often framed education in terms of local control of schools and the need to invest education monies in classrooms rather than the federal bureaucracy—two themes that dovetail nicely with the Republican Party's traditional emphasis on smaller government (see Sides, 2006). In sum, candidates have enough rhetorical freedom when designing campaign messages that an amenable frame can likely be found for nearly any issue. This may explain why dialogue is more common in elections than ownership theory would predict (Ridout et al., 2006; Sigelman & Buell, 2004).

A second theory—what I call "issue salience"—contends that candidates should focus on the issues voters deem most important, regardless of whether the candidate's party "owns" those issues. The logic of what Ansolabehere and Iyengar (1994) call "riding the wave" is straightforward: By emphasizing the issues voters already consider important, candidates appear responsive to voters' concerns. Ignoring those issues could lead voters to perceive the candidate as "out of touch."

However, issue salience theory may not accurately describe candidate strategy because it does not take into account candidates' ability to shift voters' priorities. This agenda-setting effect has been documented in studies of campaigns and of the media generally (e.g., Berelson, Lazarsfeld, & McPhee, 1954; Iyengar & Kinder, 1987; Johnston, Blais, Brady, & Crête, 1992). Given the opportunity, candidates may emphasize new issues, intending to make those issues important to voters, rather than simply emphasizing

already salient issues. Dick Dresner, the pollster for Pete Wilson during the 1994 election, describes the agenda-setting strategy that the Wilson campaign pursued:

If I can control the agenda and expand the number of people who are concerned about immigration or crime, then I can change their focus from something else, whether it's the environment or education or whatever. We developed techniques to expand our audience. They worked, and the number of people concerned about these issues just kept growing. (quoted in Lubenow, 1995, p. 79)

It is also important to note a countervailing theory about the effects of issue emphasis on electoral outcomes, the "minimal effects" theory. Though ownership and salience theories suggest quite different campaign strategies, they both assert that "campaigns matter," specifically that candidate messages have measurable consequences for voters' preferences. The minimal effects theory, by contrast, would predict few consequences. One reason is that many citizens are not attentive enough to politics to be exposed to many campaign messages. Even messages they encounter unintentionally can be ignored, for example, by changing the channel when a campaign advertisement comes on the television. A second reason is that elections depend more on the "fundamentals"—for example, the state of the economy and the popularity of the president—and on the basic structure of competition—for instance, the presence of a well-funded challenger (see, *inter alia*, Jacobson, 2004; Zaller, 2001). Thus, specific campaign messages and tactics may make only a marginal difference. Even scholars who find evidence of campaign effects are careful not to overstate their implications: "Too much should not be made of the campaign effects discovered here—no elections would have been reversed without implausible changes in the distribution of campaigning in several key states" (Shaw, 1999, p. 357). Thus, campaign messages, whether they emphasize owned or salient issues, may not affect election outcomes.

These theories generate distinct predictions about the structure of campaign agendas and how they affect election outcomes. Issue ownership theory maintains that advertising on "unowned" issues is potentially detrimental to a candidate's fortunes, and candidates who "issue trespass" could suffer. Thus, candidates from each party should emphasize the issues their party owns, leading the parties to "talk past" each other during the campaign. It follows that across issues, there should be a stronger correlation between candidate emphasis and the degree of ownership than between

candidate emphasis and the degree of salience. Ultimately, the degree to which candidates emphasize owned issues should be positively associated with vote share. Issue salience theory generates quite different expectations. Candidates should tend to emphasize issues that the public considers important, thus generating convergence on a common set of issues. There should be a stronger correlation between emphasis and the degree of salience than between emphasis and the degree of ownership, and the degree to which candidates emphasize salient issues should be positively associated with vote share, regardless of which party “owns” any particular issue. This study also tests a corollary expectation that the interaction of salience and ownership affects election outcomes. Do candidates do better on Election Day when they focus on issues that their party owns and that are salient to voters? Finally, the theory of minimal effects does not generate expectations about the structure of campaign agendas; it merely predicts, against ownership and salience theories, that campaign agendas will have little consequence for election outcomes.

Data and Measures

Drawing on a large database of Senate and House television advertising in 1998, 2000, and 2002, I measured each candidate’s issue emphasis and examined the association between emphasis of owned and salient issues and the outcome of the race. The data pertain to advertisements collected by the Campaign Media Analysis Group (CMAG) and compiled and released by the Brennan Center for Justice at New York University (the 1998 data) and by the Wisconsin Advertising Project (the 2000 and 2002 data).³ Freedman and Goldstein (1999) describe the technology by which these data were obtained (see also Freedman, Franz, & Goldstein, 2004; Goldstein & Freedman, 2000, 2002). CMAG tracked the 75 largest media markets in the country in 1998 and 2000 and the 100 largest markets in 2002. The data contain advertisements from 29 of 34 Senate races and 135 House races in 1998, 28 of 33 Senate races and 136 House races in 2000, and 27 of 33 Senate races and 138 House races in 2002. The races not represented in this data set featured either no advertising from either candidate—which is not uncommon in House races (Jacobson, 2004, p. 88)—or advertising in a media market that CMAG did not track. However, because the media markets CMAG tracks include approximately 80% of the U.S. population, CMAG captures content from the vast majority of races that featured televised advertising. These data are as close to a census of political

advertising as exists, and they extend previous studies of the consequences of issue emphasis, which are based on case studies of individual races (Ansolabehere & Iyengar, 1994; Iyengar & Valentino, 2000; Simon, 2002). These data also contain information about how frequently a particular ad aired. As Prior (2001) demonstrates, an accurate portrait of advertising content must account for airings; judging content by the number of ads a candidate produces may be misleading if the candidate ran a few ads repeatedly and aired the others less often.

To measure issue emphasis, I constructed a measure of the “advertising time” devoted to each issue. The measure is based on the Brennan Center’s and Wisconsin Advertising Project’s coding of issues. Up to four issues per ad were coded, including issues related to the candidates’ experience and personal qualities as well as those related to specific policies. The measure takes into account both the number of issues any individual advertisement mentioned and the number of times that advertisement aired. The former is necessary because advertisements that focus on one issue for 30 seconds indicate more emphasis than do those mentioning multiple issues. The latter is important because certain advertisements aired more frequently than others.

For example, suppose a candidate produced two ads. The first, entitled “Save Social Security,” aired 700 times and focused exclusively on Social Security. The second, entitled “Helping Seniors,” aired 300 times and focused on three issues, Social Security, health care, and Medicare. Calculating how much “advertising time” was spent on these three issues involves determining the proportion of the candidate’s total airings ($700 + 300 = 1,000$) that each advertisement comprised—.70 for “Save Social Security” and .30 for “Helping Seniors.” That proportion is then divided by the number of issues the advertisement mentioned—.70 / 1 = .70 for “Saving Social Security” and .30 / 3 = .10 for “Helping Seniors.” I assigned this proportion to each issue mentioned in the ad and summed these proportions for each issue across the two ads—.70 + .10 = .80 for Social Security, .10 for health care, and .10 for Medicare. The resulting measure—a proportion ranging between 0 and 1—specifies the amount of advertising time that a candidate devoted to a specific issue.⁴

To determine which issues each party owns, the study follows Petrocik’s (1996) precedent of relying on poll questions about which party is better able to “handle” certain issues. To extend his analysis and evaluate issue ownership prior to the 1998-2002 elections, I gathered polling data from 1990 to 2002.⁵ To measure party advantage, I subtracted the percentage of respondents who said the Republicans could better handle an issue from the percentage who said the Democrats could do so, relying on the poll closest

to September of the election year.⁶ To measure the salience of issues, I again draw on survey data. In July of each election year, the Harris Poll asks, "What do you think are the two most important issues for the government to address?" The use of a July poll is important because polls from later in the fall may reflect agenda-setting effects of the campaign itself.⁷ Polls taken in July are largely exogenous to the campaign because most electioneering begins around Labor Day. Using these polls, salience was measured as the proportion who selected an issue as one of the two most important.⁸

Table 1 presents descriptive information about these three measures—advertising time, ownership advantage, and issue salience—separately for the 1998, 2000, and 2002 elections.⁹ Issues are ordered in terms of the average ownership advantage over these three elections, with the Democratic Party's "owned" issues at the top. The first seven issues—the environment, Medicare, Social Security, health care, education, jobs, and the deficit/budget—all manifested a Democratic advantage, though the advantage for jobs and the deficit is small. The Republican Party had a slight advantage on taxes and foreign affairs, a larger advantage on crime, and sizable advantages on defense and terrorism. These findings generally comport with conventional wisdom and with those reported by Petrocik (1996). However, there are also some notable dynamics in issue ownership over time. The Democratic Party's advantage on Medicare, Social Security, and health care increased from 1998 to 2000 but decreased from 2000 to 2002. Their advantage on education declined significantly from 1998 to 2002; by 2002, that advantage (1 point) was within sampling error, perhaps because President Bush's attention to education early in his first term improved perceptions of the Republican Party. Moreover, the increasing Republican advantage on crime shows that President Clinton's efforts to "steal" the issue (Holian, 2004) had only temporary effects.

Whereas the public's 1998 and 2000 agendas were largely similar, its 2002 agenda was very different. In 1998 and 2000, the most salient issues were largely ones that the Democratic Party "owned"—especially education, health care, and Social Security. Taxes and crime were also important priorities for many citizens, but these issues did not offer a significant ownership advantage to Republicans. Thus, Democrats could pursue an "ownership strategy" and a "salience strategy" simultaneously, whereas Republicans lacked this possibility. By 2002, however, the September 11 attacks and the economic downturn had reoriented the public's priorities to jobs, terrorism, and defense. Thus, the positions of the parties were somewhat reversed. Republicans could campaign on terrorism and defense and capitalize on their ownership advantage and on

Table 1
Issue Ownership and Advertising Emphasis in 1998 and 2000

Issue	1998				2000			
	Ownership Advantage		% Advertising Time Devoted to Issue		Ownership Advantage		% Advertising Time Devoted to Issue	
	Saliency (% MIP)	Republican	Democrat	Saliency (% MIP)	Ownership Advantage	Republican	Democrat	Saliency (% MIP)
Environment	28	2.3	2.9	31	28	2.2	2.1	2
Medicare	16	4.3	5.6	29	17	4.3	9.7	1
Social Security	16	11.6	12.2	25	15	8.4	6.9	4
Health care	21	4.5	9.9	21	10	7.9	13.6	8
Education	21	9.8	15.6	16	1	10.4	11.1	8
Jobs	7	3.5	2.9	7	7	2.0	1.0	37
Deficit/budget	3	4.8	4.0	3	3	3.0	3.0	0
Taxes	1	16.4	6.6	-9	-3	10.1	5.5	5
Foreign affairs	-4	0.5	0.0	-8	-4	0.4	0.8	3
Crime	1	5.4	5.8	-4	-14	2.2	2.2	5
Defense	-16	0.8	0.7	-21	-16	0.7	0.4	20
Terrorism	-	-	-	-	-25	-	-	30
Total advertising time on Democratic issues	-	40.8	53.1	-	-	38.2	47.4	30.0
Total advertising time on Republican issues	-	23.1	13.1	-	-	13.4	8.9	16.1
N (candidates)	-	139	129	-	-	129	128	147

Note: "Ownership advantage" is equal to the percentage that trust the Democrat to handle each issue, minus the percentage that trust the Republican, from the survey closest to Labor Day of the election year. "% MIP" is the percentage of respondents who identified the issue as one of the "two most important issues for government to address" in a Harris Poll taken in July of the election year. "% Advertising Time Devoted to Issue" is the measure described in the text. Shaded cells indicate that the difference between Democratic and Republican advertising time is statistically significant at $p < .05$.

issue salience. Democrats could behave similarly by focusing on jobs, but their ownership advantage on that issue was not very large.

How did the parties design their campaign agendas? Table 1 shows the advertising time devoted to each of these 12 issues by Democratic and Republican candidates in each election. Shaded entries indicate a statistically significant difference between Democrats and Republicans. Several issues manifest significant differences in the direction expected by the notion of issue ownership. For example, throughout this period, Democrats emphasized health care more than Republicans did, and in 2000-2002 Democrats put more emphasis on Medicare. Similarly, Republicans put more emphasis on taxes in all three election years and more attention to defense and terrorism in 2002.

However, a number of issues with an ostensible ownership advantage reveal no significant differences between the parties. This is largely because Republicans so frequently "trespassed" on Democratic issues. The bottom two rows of Table 1 summarize advertising on issues with a Democratic advantage and with a Republican advantage.¹⁰ Trespassing on "Republican" issues by Democratic candidates was not that prevalent, comprising 13% of advertising time in 1998, 9% in 2000, and 8% in 2002. By contrast, trespassing by Republican candidates was extensive. In 1998, about 41% of Republican advertising time was devoted to "Democratic" issues such as education, health care, and Social Security. That figure was roughly the same in 2000 (38%). Even in 2002, when "Republican" issues such as terrorism and defense were so prominent, Republicans devoted more time in total to Democratic issues than to Republican issues (30% vs. 16%). Democrats, by contrast, were much less likely to trespass on Republican issues, even in 2002, when an issue salience strategy would suggest particular attention to terrorism and defense.¹¹

One way to evaluate how the parties' strategies conform to the dictates of ownership and salience strategies is by correlating advertising time with the indicators of ownership advantage and salience across these 12 issues—that is, estimating the relationship among the various columns of Table 1. Table 2 presents these correlations. Several findings stand out. First, the correlations between ownership advantage and salience confirm the strategic circumstances of each election. In 1998 and 2000, these two measures are positively correlated ($r = .25$ and $.29$, respectively), indicating that strength of the Democratic Party's advantage increases alongside the issue's salience on the public agenda. In 2002, however, this relationship reversed ($r = -.44$), as Republican-owned issues such as terrorism were more prominent.

By contrast, the relationship between Republican advertising time and Democratic advertising time was always positive and statistically significant,

Table 2
Correlations of Advertising Time With Ownership
Advantage and Issue Salience

	Ownership Advantage	% Most Important Problem (MIP)	Republican Advertising Time	Democratic Advertising Time
1998				
Ownership advantage	—			
Salience (% MIP)	0.25	—		
Republican advertising time	0.19	0.57	—	
Democratic advertising time	0.58	0.67*	0.66*	—
2000				
Ownership advantage	—			
Salience (% MIP)	0.29	—		
Republican advertising time	0.33	0.80*	—	
Democratic advertising time	0.58	0.68*	0.78*	—
2002				
Ownership advantage	—			
Salience (% MIP)	-0.44	—		
Republican advertising time	0.10	0.19	—	
Democratic advertising time	0.39	0.01	0.82*	—

Note: Cell entries are Pearson's correlation coefficients.

* $p < .05$, $N = 11$ in 1998 to 2000; $N = 12$ in 2002.

and the strength of that relationship increased over time, from $r = .66$ in 1998 to $r = .82$ in 2002.¹² This shows that the two parties were not “talking past” each other but tended to emphasize the same limited set of issues.

In 1998 and 2000, there is some evidence that both parties pursued a “salience” strategy more than an “ownership” strategy. The correlations between advertising time and salience are larger than those between advertising time and ownership advantage. This is particularly true for Republicans (e.g., in 2000, the former was .80 and the latter .33). This is less true for Democrats because in 1998 and 2000, the most salient issues tended to be Democratically owned. Nevertheless, in these 2 years the relationship between Democratic advertising time and salience is always stronger and more statistically significant than the relationship between Democratic advertising time and ownership. In 2002, however, there are no clear patterns. Democratic advertising time is more associated with ownership advantage ($r = .39$) than salience ($r = .01$), though neither correlation is statistically significant. The results are similarly equivocal for Republicans. One explanation is that in 2002, both parties spent considerable time discussing issues such as education, health care, and Social Security, even though these issues were not very salient to the public.

In sum, in three election years, House and Senate candidates tended to concentrate more on salient issues than on “owned” issues, although the results for 2002 complicate that story somewhat. Republican trespassing on Democratic issues was particularly common. The question now becomes whether Republican candidates were punished for trespassing and, more generally, whether campaign agendas had consequences on Election Day.

The Effects of Issue Trespassing

To examine the effects of issue emphasis, the relationship between emphasis and vote share was examined in two different ways. First, Republicans and Democrats were examined separately to see whether an ownership or salience strategy affected their vote share in these three elections. Then pairs of opposing candidates were examined to see whether either strategy was effective given the strategy that the opposing candidate was pursuing.

The Effects of Trespassing Within Parties

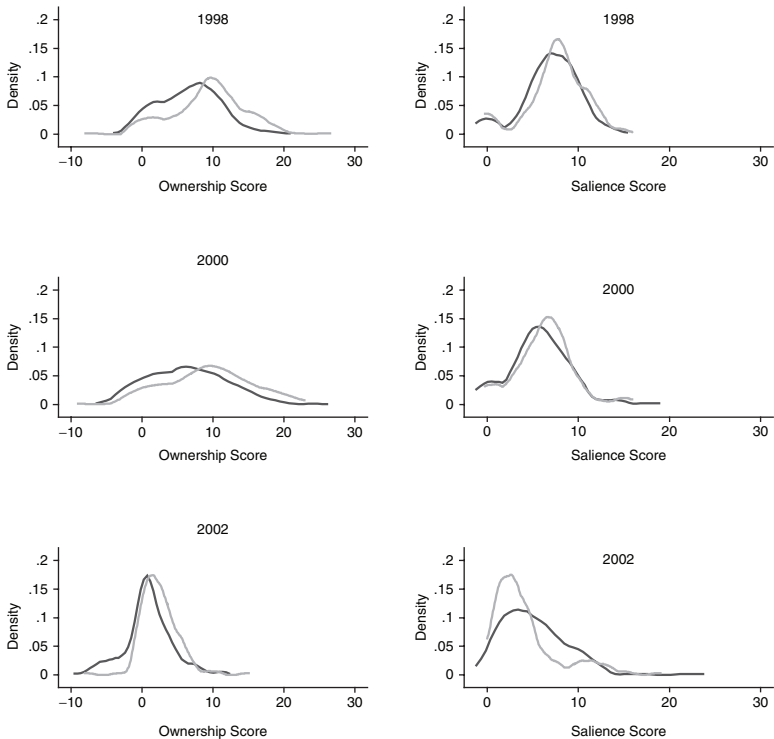
Did candidates who devoted more emphasis to owned or salient issues receive a greater vote share, relative to other candidates in their party? To measure emphasis on owned issues, I multiplied advertising time on each

issue by the ownership advantage on that issue and then summed across issues. Positive values on this measure indicate greater emphasis on issues that the Democratic Party owned, whereas negative values indicate greater emphasis on issues that the Republican Party owned. To measure emphasis on salient issues, advertising time on each issue was multiplied by the percentage of the public citing the issue as an important problem and then summed across issues. Higher values thus indicate more attention to issues that the public considered important.¹³ Each measure was multiplied by 100 to make a one-unit shift more meaningful.

Figure 1 presents kernel density plots of each measure, with separate scores for Democratic and Republican candidates in each year. Republican candidates are indicated with the darker of the two lines. These plots contain many features that conform to the findings in Tables 1 and 2. In 1998 and 2000, the mean on the ownership scale is well above 0 for each party, indicating that Republican and Democratic candidates focused largely on Democratic issues, though Democrats do so more often.¹⁴ In 2002, these scores were lower (and less dispersed), which derives in part from the Democratic Party's smaller ownership advantage on many prominent issues—notably education, but also Medicare, Social Security, and health care (see Table 1). The distributions of salience scores within the two parties were similar in 1998 and 2000, with no statistically significant differences between the party means ($p = .20$ in 1998; $p = .26$ in 2000). However, in 2002, Republicans had a higher mean salience score because they devoted more time to the issues of terrorism and defense (the difference in means is statistically significant, $p < .05$). In both 1998 and 2000, the ownership and salience measures are correlated at about .65 for each party ($p < .001$)—not surprising given the overlap between the public's agenda and the issues on which the Democrats possessed an ownership advantage. Comparable correlations in the 2002 data are much smaller ($r = .03$ for Republicans; $r = .12$ for Democrats) because the public's agenda centered on both "Democratic" and "Republican" issues.

The next step is to estimate a model of each candidate's share of the two-party vote, with these two measures as the key predictors. This model includes other variables known to affect congressional election outcomes: the difference in spending between the candidate and his or her opponent (divided by the total amount of spending to account for different levels of spending in the various races); incumbent status, here measured with a series of dummy variables conveying whether the candidate was an incumbent, a quality challenger, or running for an open seat (with nonquality challengers the excluded category); an interaction between the incumbency dummy and

Figure 1
Distribution of Ownership and Saliency Scores, by Party



Note: The graphs are kernel density plots of the saliency and ownership indices described in the text. The darker lines correspond to Republican candidates and the lighter lines to Democratic candidates.

the presence of a quality challenger, to capture whether quality challengers lessened the incumbency advantage; and Clinton's or Gore's share of the two-party vote in the candidate's district or state in 1996 or 2000. Any candidate who had an uncontested race was eliminated from this study.¹⁵

Table 3 presents the results of these two models for each party's candidates in each election year. As expected, candidates tended to do better when they spent more than their opponent, when they were incumbents, and when their district or state leaned in an ideologically favorable direction, as

Table 3
Models of Democratic and Republican Vote Share

	1998		2000		2002	
	Republicans	Democrats	Republicans	Democrats	Republicans	Democrats
Ownership score (high = Democrat)	0.11 (0.13)	0.08 (0.11)	-0.02 (0.10)	-0.04 (0.12)	0.36* (0.15)	-0.02 (0.22)
Salience score	0.10 (0.19)	-0.30 (0.18)	0.23 (0.17)	-0.21 (0.21)	-0.09 (0.16)	0.08 (0.16)
Difference in spending	12.15** (1.17)	12.96** (1.26)	11.06** (1.23)	12.43** (1.41)	9.72** (1.35)	8.98** (1.64)
Incumbent	10.60** (1.75)	8.94** (1.74)	8.85** (1.86)	8.87** (1.87)	10.71** (1.89)	9.83** (2.01)
Incumbent × Quality						
Challenger	-2.43 (1.25)	-3.14* (1.25)	-1.59 (1.21)	-1.96 (1.52)	-1.52 (1.81)	-0.47 (1.99)
Quality challenger	3.05* (1.45)	1.45 (1.51)	0.33 (1.77)	0.85 (1.51)	1.99 (2.25)	1.87 (2.15)
Open seat candidate	4.98** (1.54)	5.17** (1.55)	4.51** (1.66)	3.25* (1.60)	5.62** (1.68)	5.23** (1.59)
Clinton or Gore % in 1996/2000	-0.30** (0.07)	0.37** (0.07)	-0.27** (0.06)	0.34** (0.06)	-0.47** (0.07)	0.42** (0.08)
Constant	58.62** (4.05)	28.32** (3.63)	58.91** (3.36)	31.21** (3.21)	68.60** (3.74)	22.64** (4.03)
Adjusted R^2	0.84	0.82	0.81	0.82	0.76	0.70
N	139	128	124	126	139	126

Note: Table entries are unstandardized regression coefficients, with standard errors in parentheses. The dependent variable is the Democrat's or Republican's two-party share of the vote.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

captured by Clinton's or Gore's share of the vote. There is limited evidence that facing a quality challenger weakened the incumbency advantage, as only one coefficient is statistically significant. Finally, relative to the excluded category (inexperienced challengers), open-seat candidates also won larger vote shares.

More importantly, neither strategy for structuring campaign agendas, ownership or salience, had a robust effect on vote shares. The coefficients are, with one exception, statistically nonsignificant and are also inconsistently signed. The lone exception, in the model of Republican vote share in 2002, runs counter to the hypothesis: *Ceteris paribus*, higher Democratic ownership scores are associated with a *greater* vote share for Republicans. Substantively, a one-unit shift in the ownership index is associated with a 0.3 percentage point increase in vote share. A standard-deviation shift in this index (about 3.3 units) is associated with a 1.2-point increase in vote share. Thus, the magnitude of this effect is not large, particularly compared with that of the other variables in the model. For example, a standard-deviation increase in Gore's 2000 vote share is associated with a 4-point decrease in Republican vote share. Nevertheless, the effect of ownership score in this one case is curious.¹⁶ More broadly, though, the results in Table 3 suggest that neither theory of agenda formation has much empirical traction in these three election years.¹⁷

The Effects of Trespassing Within Races

There are 103 races in which the advertising databases contain ads from both opposing candidates in 1998, 93 in 2000, and 111 in 2002. In these races, the question is how opposing candidates' strategies jointly affected the election outcome. For example, did the effect of the Democratic candidate's ownership score on his or her vote share depend on how frequently the Republican candidate "trespassed" on Democratic issues? Did the effect of a candidate's salience score depend on the opponent's attentiveness to salient issues?

The challenge in constructing a model in this circumstance is how to specify the effects of agenda strategies. There are four baseline measures of strategy: the salience and ownership scores of the Democratic and Republican candidates. However, if it is the combination of strategies that matters, not only these measures but also interactions between Democratic and Republican strategies must be included. But which ones? If we include the possibility of an interaction between a single candidate's ownership and salience scores, then there are six possible two-way combinations of these four baseline measures. What combination of those six interaction terms is

appropriate? No strong theory guides model specification in this case. The task faces an additional hurdle in the data themselves, which is the presence of collinearity in highly interactive models.¹⁸

To account for specification uncertainty, I use a Bayesian model averaging approach (see Bartels, 1997). Instead of estimating many models and presenting only the “best” one, this study estimates a series of models including different combinations of interaction terms and then uses Bayesian averaging to distill these models to a single set of results. This set of results is produced by weighting the coefficients and standard errors from various models by the posterior probability of each model and then averaging them.¹⁹

Eight models were estimated in which the dependent variable was the Democratic candidate’s margin of victory or defeat. Included as control variables were a dummy variable for whether the Democrat was an incumbent, a dummy variable for whether the Republican was an incumbent, the Democrat’s edge in spending, and Clinton’s or Gore’s percentage of the vote in the state or district in 1996 or 2000, as appropriate. Each model contained the salience and ownership scores of both the Democratic and Republican candidates. The models varied in the interaction terms that were included. The models are listed below, with shorthand abbreviations for these variables (e.g., DemSal is the Democratic candidate’s salience score):

1. no interaction terms
2. DemSal \times DemOwn, RepSal \times RepOwn
3. DemSal \times RepSal; DemOwn \times RepOwn
4. DemSal \times RepOwn; DemOwn \times RepSal
5. Models 2 and 3 combined
6. Models 2 and 4 combined
7. Models 3 and 4 combined
8. Models 2, 3, and 4 combined

To be sure, these specifications do not exhaust all possible combinations of these six interaction terms. They do, however, test for several plausible combinations, providing a more robust sense of whether significant interactions exist.

Table 4 presents the regression coefficients and standard errors from a Bayesian averaging of these eight models.²⁰ A glance at the control variables reveals a number of strong and statistically significant effects that comport with existing literature: The Democrat’s margin of victory increased when the Democrat was the incumbent, decreased when the Republican was the incumbent, increased with the Democrat’s spending edge, and increased with Clinton’s or Gore’s percentage of the vote.

Table 4
Models of the Democrat's Margin of Victory in Two-Candidate Races

	1998	2000	2002
Democratic salience score	-0.859 (0.603)	-0.468 (0.534)	0.062 (0.472)
Republican salience score	0.135 (0.707)	-0.249 (0.458)	-0.141 (0.532)
Democratic ownership score	0.334 (0.431)	0.154 (0.274)	-0.084 (0.888)
Republican ownership score	-0.538 (0.601)	-0.385 (0.293)	-1.929 (0.764)
Democratic Ownership × Democratic Salience	0.001 (0.012)	0.001 (0.008)	0.003 (0.031)
Republican Ownership × Republican Salience	0.001 (0.007)	-0.001 (0.008)	0.001 (0.018)
Democratic Salience × Republican Salience	-0.002 (0.025)	-0.001 (0.017)	0.003 (0.031)
Democratic Ownership × Republican Ownership	0.001 (0.008)	0.001 (0.005)	0.022 (0.077)
Democratic Salience × Republican Ownership	0.017 (0.059)	0.001 (0.011)	0.161 (0.148)
Democratic Ownership × Republican Salience	-0.014 (0.048)	0.001 (0.009)	-0.026 (0.113)
Incumbent Democrat running	6.944 (2.826)	8.321 (2.959)	11.104 (2.953)
Incumbent Republican running	-8.712 (2.782)	-5.319 (2.815)	-9.401 (2.599)
Democrat's edge in spending	22.185 (2.883)	19.421 (3.311)	12.603 (3.606)
Clinton or Gore % in 1996/2000	0.693 (0.154)	0.556 (0.152)	0.959 (0.168)
Constant	-28.693 (9.027)	-24.129 (8.616)	-48.249 (8.585)
<i>N</i>	103	93	111

Note: Table entries are unstandardized regression coefficients and standard errors that have been derived from a series of models via Bayesian model averaging. The dependent variable is the Democrat's margin of victory/defeat.

By contrast, the findings for the measure of candidate agendas show almost no significant effects. Of the four baseline measures, only one is statistically significant at conventional levels: the Republican's ownership score in 2002 ($b = -1.929$; $SE = 0.764$). This significant result captures the effect of the Republican's ownership score when the other three measures of candidate agendas are equal to 0. As the Republican's ownership score increased—that is, as the Republican emphasized “Democratic” issues to a larger extent—the Democrat's margin of victory declined. This result thus confirms that in Table 3: Republicans in 2002 did somewhat better when they emphasized Democratic issues. Furthermore, in these models, none of the interaction terms is close to statistical significance. When averaging across a range of plausible model specifications, there is minimal evidence that the

relationship between a candidate's agenda strategy and his or her vote share depended on the agenda strategy of the opponent.

Conclusion

Candidates must decide which issues to emphasize in their campaign. To this point, however, there has been little systematic evidence of whether these decisions have consequences on Election Day. This examination of House and Senate races from 1998, 2000, and 2002 suggests that candidate agendas do not have any consistent impact on vote share.²¹ Once important structural features of elections are taken into account, there is no significant relationship between how much candidates emphasized either owned or salient issues and the percentage of the vote they received.

These results suggest no implications about voter decision making and thus no straightforward prescriptive advice for candidates. Voters do not penalize candidates who "trespass" on the other party's issues or who do not devote sufficient attention to salient issues. Arguably, candidates are free to pursue an agenda of their choosing, without scrupulous adherence to either an ownership or a salience strategy. These results also provide no systematic evidence that campaign strategies affect election outcomes, and thereby support the idea of the minimal effects. Of course, given the limited nature of the data, it is premature to conclude that campaign agendas are never important. More nuanced measures of issue salience in states and especially congressional districts could produce larger effects. Comparable data from additional races and election years may generate different results and will also allow more comparisons among elections in terms of the salient issues and other attributes. But given the lack of competitiveness in so many House and Senate elections, these agendas will likely matter mostly at the margins.

Why do these results show less evidence for ownership and salience theories, and for their effects on electoral outcomes, than many prior studies? In part, this may stem from differences in data sources and research design. The advertising data employed here are, within these election years, more systematic than archived collections of advertising and, furthermore, include information about the volume of advertising, which factors into the measures I employ. Other studies that have examined these data have come to similar conclusions (Ridout et al., 2006). In terms of research design, this study is unique in that it examines electoral outcomes rather than the individual-level attitudes of voters. Moreover, the effects of campaign messages are derived from actual campaigns rather than experimental

manipulations in the laboratory (e.g., Simon, 2002). Both designs have their respective merits, but obviously there are many reasons why the “real-world” effects of campaigns may not confirm laboratory findings. Notably, barriers to exposure are eliminated in the laboratory.

A second reason for the discrepancies between my findings and other research is the time period examined. In particular, the years 1998 to 2002 witnessed several significant attempts by the Republican and Democratic Parties to engage issues traditionally associated with the other party. Clinton “triangulated” by focusing on crime and on welfare reform. George W. Bush focused on education and Social Security reform. Petrocik et al. (2003) also found an increasing level of Republican trespassing after 1988. One might conclude that the apparent weakness of issue ownership theory is only a recent phenomenon. However, extant evidence suggests otherwise. Petrocik et al. find that in earlier elections, Democratic presidential candidates routinely emphasized “Republican” issues more than “Democratic” issues—for instance, in 1964, 1968, 1972, 1980, and 1984 (see their Figure 4, p. 612). Sigelman and Buell (2004) find also comparable levels of dialogue in every presidential election between 1960 and 2000. The extent of trespassing in the 1998–2002 elections is not unusual.

An important task for future research is to examine why ownership and salience theories have little empirical traction. Despite the solid logic behind both theories, candidate agendas do not consistently “obey” either theory. One possible reason is offered by Sellers (1998), who argues that candidates emphasize issues on which they share a “common interest” with voters and on which they have a record of accomplishment. Thus, even if the candidate’s party does not “own” an issue, the candidate’s record of accomplishment may allow him or her to talk credibly about that issue. Given that a record of accomplishment is often easy to claim—particularly if the “accomplishments” entail little more than introducing bills and casting roll call votes—candidates may address issues without regard to ownership or salience. Although some research (Sides, 2006) suggests a weak link between candidates’ record, objectively defined, and issue emphasis, this may merely reflect candidates’ highly subjective definitions of their “records.” Sellers’s theory awaits further testing and elaboration. For example, one question that Sellers does not address is whether candidates who consistently emphasize their record also earn more votes on Election Day.

A possible reason that ownership and salience theories do not affect electoral outcomes is that effective campaign messages depend on subtle aspects of framing and less on consistent obedience to broad theories. Candidates may believe this and design their messages accordingly. Extant research has begun

to examine, for example, how framing enables parties to trespass (Holian, 2004; Sides, 2006). It may also enable them to pursue an effective agenda-setting strategy rather than merely emphasizing currently salient issues. Framing could entail connections between issues and policy proposals that comport with a party's ideology. It may also entail particular combinations of retrospective or "performance" themes that stress past success or failure and prospective themes that stress future plans and goals. It may entail manipulating the emotional content of the advertisement (see Brader, 2006). It may entail a strategy conceived not in terms of discrete issues, such as health care and Medicare, but in terms of broader themes (e.g., "security") under which issues cluster. Such themes may resonate better with citizens, who often are inattentive to the details of policy proposals. To be sure, these possibilities are not exhaustive, but research in this vein will help specify better both the origins of campaign agendas and their potential consequences for candidate fortunes.

Notes

1. Petrocik (1996) also distinguishes "performance" issues from issues owned by a party. He defines performance issues as "wars, failed international or domestic policies, unemployment and inflation, or official corruption" (p. 826) and argues that evaluations of performance depend more on the incumbent's record than on the historical record of the party. I would argue that with the possible exception of official corruption, there are no purely "performance" issues. Most any issue can be framed in terms of performance—i.e., by lauding or criticizing the incumbent's record—or in other terms, such as by proposing new policies. For example, a "performance" issue such as unemployment could be discussed purely in terms of a proposed government investment in job training, without reference to the incumbent. An "owned" issue such as the environment could be discussed in terms of performance by emphasizing environmental disasters that occurred on the incumbent's watch. In the analysis that follows, I do not attempt to separate performance-related themes from other themes, though this is an important task for future research.

2. Moreover, voters' perceptions of the parties may be so fixed that "trespassing" on the other party's issues will not register. Norpoth and Buchanan's (1992) examination of the 1988 presidential race demonstrates that most voters misattributed the candidates' slogans to the candidate whose party owned the issue—e.g., they thought Dukakis wanted to be the "Education President," even though this was Bush's self-proclaimed intent.

3. The 1998 advertising data come from the Brennan Center for Justice at New York University School of Law, which used data obtained from the Campaign Media Analysis Group in Washington, D.C. Ken Goldstein deserves particular thanks for providing access to copies of the 1998 advertisements. The 2000 data are based on work supported by The Pew Charitable Trusts under a grant to the Brennan Center and a subsequent subcontract to the Department of Political Science at the University of Wisconsin–Madison. The 2002 data were obtained from a project of the Wisconsin Advertising Project, under Professor Kenneth Goldstein and Joel Rivlin of the University of Wisconsin–Madison, and include media-tracking

data from the Campaign Media Analysis Group. The Wisconsin Advertising Project was sponsored by a grant from The Pew Charitable Trusts. The opinions expressed in this article are the author's and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Brennan Center, the Campaign Media Analysis Group, the Wisconsin Advertising Project, Professor Goldstein, Joel Rivlin, or The Pew Charitable Trusts.

4. Three further points about this measure are in order. First, I calculate a proportion because the raw number of ads varies wildly across races and thus some kind of standardization is in order (see also Sigelman & Buell, 2004). Second, dividing by the number of issues in the ad is inexact in that it assumes equal time for each issue within the ad. Nevertheless, given the difficulties inherent in ascertaining time precisely and developing a finer-grained measure, the version I employ here seems sensible. Third, this measure does take into account themes in advertising that are not related to policy issues (such as a candidate's experience and background), to not exaggerate the amount of advertising time devoted to policy issues.

5. These were obtained via the Lexis-Nexis search engine, which searches the Roper Center for Public Opinion Research. (The precise wording of these questions is available from the author.)

6. Some respondents indicated that neither party was or both parties were able to handle an issue, and a smaller number expressed no opinion. On average, about 18% of respondents gave one of these three answers. Thus, most respondents expressed some opinion about which party is better able to handle these issues.

7. That said, in 1998, 2000, and 2002, there is not much evidence that the agenda shifted much between July and the fall. The only exception is that concerns about war and Iraq increased between July and October of 2002 after Bush gave his speech at the United Nations and Congress authorized the use of force. However, as shown below, issues related to defense and foreign affairs did not figure prominently in campaign messages, suggesting that the issue arose too late to factor into campaign decision making.

8. Three other comments about this measure are in order. First, responses to the Harris Poll question are similar to responses to other "most important problem" questions employed by polling organizations such as Gallup. Second, though the Harris Poll sampled the adult population, auxiliary analysis with American National Election Study data turns up few differences between the agenda of this population and that of likely voters, to whom candidates pay particular attention. Third, in a few cases, I combined issues cited in the Harris Poll into omnibus categories. In each year, references to the "economy," "employment," and "jobs" were combined into "jobs." In 2002, references to "prescription drugs" were combined with "health care"; references to "Middle East peace process" were combined with "foreign policy"; and references to "national security," "homeland security," and "the war" were combined with "defense."

9. In a few cases, the measures of issue ownership were included only sporadically in surveys, meaning that the same poll provides the "ownership advantage" figure in more than one election year. Specifically, the figures for "jobs" all come from the same October 1994 poll. The figures for health care in 1998 and 2000 come from the same January 1998 poll. The figures for deficit/budget in 1998 and 2000 come from the same July 1998 poll (the 2002 figure comes from a July 2002 poll, though it is coincidentally the same as in 1998 to 2000).

10. For the purposes of this simple summary measure, the "Democratic" issues are the environment, Medicare, Social Security, health care, education, jobs, and the deficit/budget, and all other issues are "Republican."

11. In response to comments from reviewers, I investigated whether House and Senate candidates differed in the issues they emphasized and whether Republicans and Democrats running in competitive races (operationalized as those with at most a 55 to 45 margin of victory) differed

from their fellow partisans in noncompetitive races. In both cases, there were very few statistically significant differences. Also evident in Table 1 is a secular decline over time among both Democrats and Republicans in the percentage of advertising time devoted to these 12 issues. This could reflect less attention to policy-related issues and more attention to personal themes (background, values, etc.). Further investigation (not shown) suggests that the balance between issues and personal themes was constant in 1998 and 2000 but that personal themes became more prominent in 2002. However, the coding categories employed by the Wisconsin Advertising Project changed over time, complicating these comparisons among election years.

12. Bivariate regressions confirm that this relationship is increasing.

13. Because this study uses national polls to measure salience, the salience index assumes that polls in specific states or districts would not reveal a different sense of the public's agenda. To be sure, this is a strong assumption, though some auxiliary analysis comparing state-level agendas to the national agenda supports this assumption. This study drew on the 2000 National Annenberg Election Study (NAES) (specifically, the interviews completed between December 1999 and July 2000), which provides reasonably large samples in most states. The NAES's "most important problem" question was open ended, and the survey interviewer merely transcribed the response verbatim. This complicates coding considerably, but with fairly simple coding rules I was able to categorize 72% of the sample as having named one of 16 different issues. I computed the proportion of the sample naming each issue for the sample as a whole and for each individual state and then correlated each state's agenda to the national agenda. These correlations ranged from .72 to .99, with an average of .93. Thus, it does not appear that state-level agendas differ significantly from the national agenda. Of course, this analysis does not address variation across districts, but it does suggest that a salience measure based on national polls is at least somewhat defensible.

14. Though it is not readily evident from Figure 1, in 1998 to 2002 the mean ownership scores of the two parties differ at a statistically significant level ($p < .001$).

15. These models also pool Senate and House candidates, because there is no *a priori* reason to expect these independent variables to have different effects in House and Senate races (see Gronke, 2000).

16. If the model for Republicans in 2002 is estimated separately for House ($n = 118$) and Senate ($n = 21$) candidates, the effect of the ownership index is statistically significant only among the House candidates.

17. When added to the models in Table 3, an interaction between the ownership and salience scores is not statistically significant and does not change the other results substantially. I also estimated models limiting the data to more competitive races (those decided by a 55 to 45 margin or less). There was no evidence that issue emphasis had significant effects in these races.

18. The bivariate correlations between Democratic and Republican agenda strategies are not large and rarely significant. For example, in 1998, the correlation between the salience scores of opposing Democratic and Republican candidates was only $r = .06$, and the correlations between the ownership scores was $r = .04$. However, there is evidence—via variance inflation factors—that introducing multiple interactions in these models does create a significant amount of collinearity.

19. A model's posterior probability is a function of the Bayes factor for that model—which can be approximated as a formula involving the number of cases, the number of parameters, and the R^2 statistic (see Bartels, 1997, p. 648)—and the prior probability assigned to that model. Because there were no strong priors for these models, the prior probabilities are uniform, which makes the posterior probabilities solely a function of the Bayes factors.

20. The results of eight models for each year (1998, 2000, and 2002) are available from the author on request.

21. This study also examined the 77 House candidates who appear in both the 1998 and 2000 data sets, as well as the 56 House candidates who appear in both 2000 and 2002, to see whether changes in their issue emphasis from one election to the next affected the changes in their vote share across elections. There was no evidence of any such effect.

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